

From Field to Dinner Table

Tracks' segment on game preparation and cooking is back by popular demand. This page features cleaning and cooking preparation tips from Senior Wildlife Biologist Tom Blankinship, who supervises the DFG's Upland Game Program.

There are numerous opinions about the best ways to care for and prepare game birds once they are shot to make sure they will be enjoyed by your family. The following is a procedure I have used over many years of hunting for gallinaceous (chicken-like) game birds, which include pheasants, chukars, quail, and grouse. The method described below has worked well for me, particularly in the warm weather we often experience while hunting in California.

1. Remove intestines from gallinaceous birds soon after killing them. Carry extra water and wash out the body cavity if shot has punctured intestines. (Washing out the body cavity is not needed if the intestines have not been punctured.) If you washed out the bird, let it drain for a bit before placing it in your vest or pack.

2. If the weather is warm, as it typically is in our state, remove the drawn birds from your vest or pack and keep them cool as you travel home. Depending on the temperature and travel time, put them in an ice chest.

3. Once you get home, place the birds in a refrigerator for a day or two if it's more convenient to deal with them later. I've done this dozens of times, and never had any birds spoil. Since they have been eviscerated, and washed out if needed, they give off virtually no odor. (Some hunters contend that aging in a refrigerator for a few days makes birds more tender.)

4. I skin most upland game birds that I shoot. Plucking them is fine, of course, but I've found that I end up tearing the skin unless I pluck them one or a few feathers at a time, and I just don't have the patience! (Upland birds can be plucked easily immediately after they're killed, and I have a couple of friends who do that, but I want to start hunting again with no delay.)

5. Unless I'm planning to eat a bird within a few days, I wrap it for the freezer. I save plastic shopping bags over the year, and use three or four on each bird, squeezing the air out and twisting each one to close it before putting the bird in the next. I then wrap the bird tightly in freezer paper and label it. Vacuum - sealing might work even better.

6. When I'm preparing the bird for cooking, I remove the meat from the bones with a sharp knife, except for the wing and lower leg bones. I also carefully remove any previously missed feathers or visible shot, and wash the meat. This procedure takes only a few minutes and is well worth the trouble. You will end up with cleaned meat that can be cooked in a variety of ways.

